



# Court-appointed special advocates support area youth

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About 10 years ago, Laboratory employee Justin Tozer began thinking about how volunteer his time with area youth. "I'd worked with kids through Boy Scouts of America—kids who had challenges—and I knew there had to be some way to help," he remembers.

Tozer eventually decided to volunteer with the nonprofit [CASA \(Court Appointed Special Advocates\) First Judicial District](#). In a nutshell, the work involves researching the case of an abused or neglected child, writing a report, and then advising a judge on possible ways to achieve a safe and stable situation for that child.

Becoming a CASA First advocate takes about 30 hours of in-person and online training during several weeks. "You have to complete exercises, you have to observe in court, and you get sworn in as an officer of the court—that's a unique privilege usually only offered to people with a law degree," Tozer explains.

Once an advocate is assigned a case, he or she must begin researching the case, which usually takes about 20–30 hours. "You visit the child's school, home, talk to teachers, coaches, look at medical records, and look at psychological evaluations of kids and parents," Tozer explains. "You're putting together this puzzle, and then you write a fact-based report to the judge."

Advocates are expected to attend hearings, during which the judge hears verbal comments. "One of the first hearings is to determine if the kid should have been removed from the home," Tozer says. "The goal is to achieve permanency—that the child is back in an acceptable environment. *Acceptable* is not necessarily fantastic, but the fundamental risks and issues have been addressed."

Volunteering with CASA First has its highs and lows, but Tozer says overall it's very rewarding. "A lot of these kids have been through abuse and neglect, a lot of them end up living on the street or incarcerated," he explains. "It's not a pretty picture what happens to these kids if they don't get the help they need. There's some satisfaction to knowing that you helped get their lives back on a course where they can be successful."

CASA First advocates work with at-risk children in Northern New Mexico and are pivotal in identifying and accessing community resources and relationships for these children and families.

## Become an advocate

CASA First is currently looking for advocates in Los Alamos, Rio Arriba, and Santa Fe counties. Advocates must pass a background check and must commit to at least a year with the organization. “A consistent adult goes far,” explains CASA First Executive Director Annie Rasquin. “We want to minimize changes for the children.”

Training classes start July 12. [More information can be found here](#) or by calling 505-820-1500.

The need for CASA First is increasing, says CASA First Executive Director Annie Rasquin. In all of 2014, a total of 13 new child welfare cases came into custody. In all of 2015 there were 18 new cases, and in 2016 there were over 50 new cases.

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